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ABSTRACT

Two developments in language teaching have heightened the need for college-level English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers to be aware of ethical issues in selecting course content. First, prevalence of the communicative approach to language teaching broadens the scope of possible classroom topics. Second, the student-centered approach allows students a more active role in content selection. Bias relating to social and moral values appears in both commercial and authentic materials. The following are proposed guidelines that may help the ESL instructor avoid bias in the classroom: (1) address ESL students' needs for personal adjustment to their new social context; (2) select content that addresses students' stated purposes in learning English; (3) acquaint students with the moral and ethical foundations of the university; (4) consider students' comfort level with controversial, value-oriented social issues; and (5) respect students' choice in the realm of personal values. A survey of 105 students enrolled in one university's ESL writing courses explored preferences for classroom topics with either moral or practical orientation. Results indicate a preference for practical and informational topics, less attraction to the more controversial ethical and moral topics in contemporary American society, and some differences in topic appeal by sex. The student survey form and a summary of results are appended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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Ethical Considerations in Addressing Values in the ESL Classroom

Growing Ethical Consciousness in the TESOL Profession

Public dialogue among TESOL professionals has focused on various ethical issues in routine ESL activity. In the administration of ESL programs there are fairness issues in the employment of part-time instructors and tutors, and ethical concerns in representing an institution's programs and services to prospective students. Within ESL programs, Shohamy (1993) has underscored what may be called ethical principles in testing. For example, tests should be used for their intended purposes and involve teachers in the testing process to ensure equitable assessments. Palmer (1984) earlier addressed the need to adhere to ethical principle in responding to students' demand for course components that ostensibly prepare them for taking standardized proficiency tests. Viewing ethics as adherence to a broader value claim or perspective, ethical consciousness is increasingly visible within the TESOL organization as different constituencies have emerged with value orientations or ethical concerns for a particular cause. The special concerns of these professionals are manifested within the TESOL organization through the Social Concerns Interest Section and through the recent creation of a caucus structure to accommodate special constituencies of the TESOL membership. One could say that he TESOL organization as a whole evidences a high level of commitment to moral causes such as language rights of individuals, equality of the sexes, respect for all minorities, promotion of Peace Education, prevention of AIDS, and protection of the natural environment.

Ethical Concerns in Respect to ESL Subject Content

In all the issues mentioned above, one sees ethical or moral stances. Percesepe (1995) defines the field of ethics as "that branch of philosophy that seeks to analyze systematically moral

concepts (such as 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' 'wrong,' 'duty,' 'responsibility,' 'rights,' and so on) and to justify moral principles and theories" (p. 1). Accordingly, this discussion seeks to point out issues and set forth ethical principles that determine boundaries of appropriacy in the selection or emphasis of topics in ESL curriculum. The aim is to state proposals as possible guidelines appealing to the intuitions of fellow professionals rather than to detailed argument for one principle or another. At the outset of this discussion it should be recognized that the formal materials of the classroom are not the only means of conveying values to ESL students. Indeed, every teacher through his or her lesson planning, consciously or unconsciously, conveys values that are apparent, for example, in the operating priorities about the relative importance of self, the students, the educational institution and numerous cultural products. Even the instructor's conception of the role of the student in the learning process is a value-laden issue (Howard & Dedo, 1989). That is, does the student bring an independent critical perspective to serious questions, or is the student a product of his or her own culture whose views are essentially a reflection of established tradition? This discussion, however, focuses only on the choice of subject content in ESL curricula.

Two parallel developments in the field of language teaching have heightened the need for ethical awareness in the matter of selecting ESL subject content. First, the prevailing acceptance of the communicative approach to teaching, in contrast to a linguistic based or form focused curriculum, greatly broadens the scope of possible topics in the ESL classroom. That is, those maintaining that students primarily gain facility in the second language by using it to communicate about any topic of interest will naturally seek topics of contemporary significance and student interest. Thus, instructors are not confined to the topical trivia dictated by the primary pursuit of mastery of phonology and syntax. The subject content is therefore in the hand of the textbook writer, the instructor and possibly the students themselves. Secondly, there is widespread

professional agreement that a student centered approach in the classroom is more promising, and accordingly, students more often have an active role in the selection of subject content.

The subject content in view in this present discussion may be either published or teacher-made materials, written or oral. Within an ESL program, subject content is usually the decision of both the program administrator and the classroom instructor, the latter possibly in consultation with the students. Both administrator and instructor must be aware of what Heiman (1994) has pointed out to be the value-oriented bias that predominates in Western published ESL materials, especially those designed for the young adult learner. She takes issue with the fact that, "... EFL texts continue to present images and contexts in which material wealth, economic growth, and personal acquisition are portrayed as a norm" (p. 5). Further, she observes, "Empirical science is portrayed as the means of understanding the nature of life; evolutionary theory is largely presented as fact ..." (p. 6). She rightly concludes that these materials simply assume that consumerism is a good thing. The present writer would add that in addition to the prevailing bias in these published materials, there is the possible conscious or unconscious bias of each instructor as a potential purveyor of values through the frequent supplementary materials he or she brings to the classroom.

In some respects, all instructors hold value orientations or value positions that are minority perspectives for which they find themselves, in general, advocates for allegedly the good of others. For example, some instructors hold religious views that they gladly impart to others. Snelbeaker (1994), representing a different advocacy, reports varied approaches to dealing with homophobia in professional settings. Cochran (1996), viewing female ESL students as often disadvantaged by both linguistic and culturally imposed constraints, cites ways instructors can encourage gender equality. Schenke (1996) views feminism as not just a social issue but "a way of thinking, ... of teaching, and ... of learning" (p. 158). Undoubtedly, every TESOL professional holds views or identities of

ethical and moral significance for which to one degree or another they formally or informally contend.

In the present discussion, the term "values" applied to ESL curricula is used in a restricted sense. While values to some is equivalent to all the ways people of a given culture typically conduct the affairs of life, this discussion pertains to the values people hold as norms, that is, what is right versus what is wrong, and not to the values that are merely a matter of personal preference or taste. For some, the right or wrong in view rests upon a particular religious or ideological tradition while for others it emerges largely on pragmatic grounds. In either case, values here refers to deeply held positions that relate to personal decision and right living. This is not a matter of making moral decisions in the face of hypothetical situations as featured in some ESL class discussions but rather matters of everyone's daily choices in real life.

Proposed Ethical Guidelines on Content Selection

As Heiman (1994) has observed, "very little ESOL literature . . . indicates an awareness of the ethical implications of presenting or imposing modern Western values on non-Western peoples under the guise of language instruction" (p. 4). Most ESL professionals would intuitively agree on the extremes to be avoided in working out an appropriate mix of subject materials. Instructors can hardly maintain an air of neutrality on all the passing issues. On the other hand, they cannot aggressively promote value claims among students who are, in the main, but visitors in the American context. Most would agree that while their own advocacies deserve a hearing, they are not themselves a Paulo Freire (1970) contending for the betterment of their own fellow citizens. As academics, they can claim considerable precedent for advocating by lecture and argument their own views as was pointed out in the report of a recent MLA sponsored gathering of 300 academics (Wilson, 1995, p. A18-19). Yet, this natural classroom advocacy is in respect to views of

immediate relevance to the academic field of study, not for the general socialization of the students. In respect to ESL classes, few value-oriented advocacies pertain to the students' attainment of published course aims or gaining a desired score on a TOFEL examination.

Edge (1996) has recently argued that ESL professionals function within a configuration of value systems: professional values, political values and cultural values. He maintains that in the TESOL profession "the theoretical, the professional and the personal intermingle" (p. 9). In light of this inevitability, the present writer maintains that the instructor as a professional needs to exercise in the classroom the qualities of diplomacy, servanthood and personal integrity. With this in mind, the following are proposed as practical guidelines for the ESL instructor and administrator to avoid the charge of abuse of power in the classroom. The proposals are given in the imperative mode for utmost clarity.

1. The ESL Student's Immediate Survival

Address ESL students' evident needs for personal adjustment and well-being in their new social context. Young adults who have newly arrived in the U.S. are inevitably in some stage of culture shock and adjustment. While many basic needs are cared for by an institution's office of foreign student services, it is the ESL instructor who is in a position to most easily detect inadequately addressed needs in the areas of social and academic adjustment. It is hardly to be expected that newly arrived foreign students who by virtue of their language proficiency begin studying one or more courses in their major field will be given adjustment assistance in, for example, courses of economics or computer studies. Rather, a cross-culturally aware ESL instructor can include within the course curriculum helpful orientation and information without compromising course aims. Adjustment and well-being gives a wide scope of possibility and responsibility to the instructor who is intimately acquainted with the local social context. Accordingly, subject content

may deal with personal safety on the streets, matters of health and medical care, study habits, and safe avenues of contact and friendship with native speakers of English. Orientation in this area may include an overview of traditional customs and beliefs and alternative value-orientations that students may encounter in social relations. In this regard, the instructor serves the students well by fairly representing different orientations quite apart from his or her own views and life style. Areas of students' felt need can be discovered through both formal and informal inquiry.

2. The ESL Student's Study Objective

Select subject content primarily with a view to facilitating all students' communicative skill for their stated purposes in learning English. Most students are paying tuition for ESL classes to develop survival skills in English or to fulfill program or institutional requirements for further academic study. Accordingly, all aspects of ESL courses must keep in view the rights of students as consumers. Needs analyses, if not done for each class of students, must be done periodically in respect to the streams of students generally served by a given program. As assessed needs become more specialized, the literature on English for specific purposes is a standing resource for the instructor in designing or securing the most appropriate curriculum. For example, subject content must expose students to discourse patterns, relevant vocabulary, and established conventions for the students' intended uses of English. Again, the students' known purposes must dictate the emphases in subject content. The challenge here is to represent the needs of the majority of students when classes often lack homogeneity and when some students are much more vocal than others in communicating their subject interests.

3. The ESL Student's Moral Obligation

Affirm the ethical prerequisites of a functioning academic community. In short, it is incumbent upon instructors to be proactive in acquainting ESL students, who are of many different

backgrounds and of diverse educational experience, with the moral and ethical foundations of a functioning university. This includes honesty in research and writing over against misrepresentation and plagiarism. It includes the proper use of library holdings and laboratory equipment, respect and tolerance for alternative viewpoints or solutions to common problems, and a mindset receptive to the criticism of others. Further, there is the concept and practice of confidentiality in personal matters, so widely assumed in Western academic institutions. Lower level issues may also enter in such as politeness, punctuality and interpersonal cooperation in the pursuit of learning. By way of contrast, Edge (1996) has pointed out the blatant violation of this ethical and moral foundation of academic community in the murder of the translator of the controversial Satanic Verses. Edge's own response to such violence is to openly part company with those who so disregard the fundamental values of a functioning academic community. Regarding the more commonplace issues of moral duty, ESL students are well served when made to see their essential ethical responsibility in a community of scholars and to see that violators, be they plagiarizers or outright murderers, have no place in it.

4: The ESL Student's Personal Inhibitions

Consider students' comfort level with controversial value-oriented social issues. There are areas of subject content that may be of genuine relevance to individuals or groups of students but which they themselves do not wish to discuss in the ESL classroom. For example, a student of a given religious tradition may feel it inappropriate to discuss and argue in class beliefs and practice that defy his or her own outlook, much less the veracity of his or her own cherished beliefs. Some lively debated issues of contemporary American society will not appeal to students of other backgrounds. For some, open discussion of such invites divisiveness and alienation from others. Not all students will have the same degree of comfort with a given subject of discussion, and whenever a topic leads to the silence and withdrawal of some students because of discomfort or

embarrassment, instructors are duty-bound to adjust the subject material to attain or approach unanimous participation.

5. The ESL Student's Free Agency

Respect students' sovereignty of choice in the realm of personal values. ESL students come into the context of an American language program with definite value orientations of their own, be they freely chosen or unconsciously formed by years of conditioning in their home cultures. Their immersion in an American community will inevitably create a measure of conflict whether viewed as a phase of culture shock, a period of self-discovery or a period of moral decision. To the extent they integrate into the American society they will undergo change in certain value orientations, some of likely moral significance, at least to those in their country of origin. Some of the changes are highly conscious and deliberate and others are gradual, subtle and unconscious. Except for the values incumbent upon all students as members of a functioning academic community and as members of the larger local community, no other person's value system, or standards of right and wrong, ought to be imposed upon an ESL student. His or her choices, whether they appear to accord with modernity and progressiveness or with tradition and obscurantism, are matters of his or her sovereign decision, the right of every human being. Students must be accepted and respected for what they choose to be.

Insights from Research on Students' Subject Preferences

In the fall semester of 1995, 105 students enrolled in ESL writing courses at Eastern Michigan University were surveyed in respect to their subject preferences from a list of 20 given possibilities. The majority of the students were Asians. Their time of residence in the U.S. averaged 15.8 months; the median time of residence was 12 months. The questionnaire was printed and administered to classes by the regular instructor or by a graduate assistant. Students answered

anonymously and declared their preference in two ways. First, they were to rate each of the given 20 topics as "I like it a lot," "It's OK" or "I don't like it." These were later valued as 3, 2 or 1 respectively. Second, students were asked to select by a pencil mark not more than 10 of the 20 topics as their recommendations for ESL class subject material. The students were not informed that the randomly ordered list of 20 topics was constituted of two kinds: (1) those of an assumed moral orientation in respect to personal life, and (2) those that were primarily practical or informational in nature, or, if morally conceived, distant from personal decision in the daily affairs of life. There was no formal verification of this assignment of the topics to the two categories, that is, the assignment of 10 topics to each category. In addition to determining which of the 20 topics appealed most to these students, the researcher wished to find out to what extent this student population was attracted to the more applicable morally oriented topics. The questionnaire is given in Appendix A.

Appendix B features a table showing the percentage of students who included each topic in their designation of up to 10 topics to be included in an ESL course. The table also shows the average rating on each of the 20 topics on a scale of 1 to 3, with 3 being high appeal and 1 being low appeal. The topics are rank ordered in the table according to their rating on the scale ranked from the highest to the lowest. The topics that were assumed to be of more immediate moral significance to individuals appear with the asterisk after the percentage and rating on the scale. Appendix C shows the comparative ratings of female students (n=58) and male students (n=44), and clearly some differences emerged. Profound differences in the ranking occur in respect to "Marriage and family customs in America" (3rd for women and 17th for men) and in respect to "The process of electing an American President" (20th for women and 2nd for men). Noteworthy is the fact that of the full sample of 105 students in Appendix B, the 10 most appealing topics in terms of the selection criteria included just 3 of the 10 topics of assumed personal moral or individual moral significance.

These were "Equal opportunity for women in education and employment" (ranked 1st), "Stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races" (ranked 8th) and "Having one or more sex partners without marriage" (ranked 9th). In terms of topic rating on a scale of 3 to 1, with 3 being highest, again just 3 of the more ethically or morally oriented topics appear in the top 10. These are "Equal opportunity for women in education and employment" (ranked 1st), "Stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races" (ranked 4th) and "Care and arrangements for elderly family members" (ranked 9th).

The data were also analyzed by the students' length of residence in the U.S. For comparison, the responses of the approximately one-third of the sample (n=34) who had been in the U.S. for 10 months or less were compared with the one-third (n=34) who had lived in the U.S. for 16 months or longer. There were no items that seemed to have significantly different appeal to these two groups. That is, length of residence in the U.S. did not appear to alter the appeal of the topics.

Conclusions from this study are: (1) students are more interested in the practical and informational topics than in the moral and ethical ones for class use in ESL; (2) students are clearly less attracted to most of the more controversial ethical and moral topics debated in contemporary American society; and (3) topic appeal, not surprisingly, is in some cases differentiated by sex.

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APPENDIX A

Student Opinion Survey

In this exercise please give your opinion about suitable topics for ESL lessons. Do not put your name on this paper so no one will know who likes which topics. Try to give your opinion truthfully. If you do not understand a certain question or statement, skip it--but draw a circle around the words or phrases in it that you do not understand.

First, please give your idea about the topics below. That is, when you practice the skills of reading and writing for ESL classes, do you think the following topics are good ones?

To tell your opinion, for each of the 20 topics below, check one of the three boxes. These are "I like it a lot," "It's OK," and "I don't like it." After you do this for all 20 topics, you will be asked to do a few more things to complete this questionnaire.

I like it a lot.	It's OK.	I don't like it.	TOPIC FOR AN ESL LESSON
☐	☐	☐	1. adjusting to the American way of university learning
☐	☐	☐	2. the increase of violence and crime in American cities
☐	☐	☐	3. the practice of abortion; abortion rights
☐	☐	☐	4. care and arrangements for elderly family members
☐	☐	☐	5. the process of electing an American President
☐	☐	☐	6. exercising for better physical and mental health
☐	☐	☐	7. air pollution; water pollution
☐	☐	☐	8. allowing sick and suffering old people to choose to die, that is, letting them kill themselves when they so choose
☐	☐	☐	9. marriage and family customs in America
☐	☐	☐	10. the use of illegal drugs by young people
☐	☐	☐	11. some conflicts between religion and modern science
☐	☐	☐	12. equal opportunity for women in education and employment
☐	☐	☐	13. the increasing uses of computers in the 1990s
☐	☐	☐	14. equal rights in society for gay, Lesbian and bisexual persons
☐	☐	☐	15. having one or more sex partners without marriage
☐	☐	☐	16. health insurance and automobile insurance in America
☐	☐	☐	17. comparing the beliefs of different religions to accept or reject each religion
☐	☐	☐	18. the various activities of the United Nations around the world
☐	☐	☐	19. the methods and power of commercial advertising (e.g. TV, magazines)
☐	☐	☐	20. stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races

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Now suppose you had to choose up to 10 topics from the 20 for reading and discussion in an ESL class. Which ones would you choose? Circle the number in front of each topic you would include. Do not choose more than 10.

FOR EXAMPLE: 20 stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races

---

Finally, are there a few other topics you like that are not in the list of 20 above? If so, please list these in the spaces below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please indicate the following information.

Your sex: ☐ male ☐ female

How many months or years have you lived in the U.S.? _____ months OR _____ years

THANKS FOR YOUR HELP

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APPENDIX B

Students' Topic Preference (n = 105)

	Topic of ESL Lesson	% Selecting the item	Rating (1= low & 3 = high)
1	Equal opportunity for women in education and employment	53.3*	2.34*
2	The methods and power of commercial advertising (e.g. TV, magazines)	47.6	2.34
3	The increasing uses of computers in the 1990s	43.8	2.34
4	Stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races	39.0*	2.27*
5	Adjusting to the American way of university learning	42.9	2.25
6	Marriage and family customs in America	50.5	2.19
7	Exercise for better mental and physical health	29.5	2.13
8	The various activities of the United Nations around the world	42.9	2.08
9	Care and arrangements for elderly family members	31.4*	2.06*
10	Air pollution; water pollution	33.3	2.04
11	Health insurance and automobile insurance in America	37.1	2.02
12	Allowing sick and suffering old people to choose to die; letting them kill themselves when they so choose	36.2*	2.00*
13	The use of illegal drugs by young people	36.2*	1.99*
14	The process of electing an American President	27.6	1.96
15	Some conflicts between religion and modern science	28.6*	1.94*
16	Equal rights in society for gay, Lesbian and bisexual persons	35.2*	1.93*
17	The increase of violence and crime in American cities	43.8	1.91
18	The practice of abortion; abortion rights	34.3*	1.90*
19	Comparing the beliefs of different religions to accept or reject each religion	22.9*	1.85*
20	Having one or more sex partners without marriage	38.1*	1.84*
	Average for 20 given topics by 105 students (SD = Standard Deviation) *The item was initially supposed to bemorally oriented and relevant to personal conduct.	**39.6 (SD: 8.3)**	**2.06 (SD: .17)**

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APPENDIX C

Analysis of Topic Preference by Sex (N=102)

Topic of ESL Lesson	Women n=58		Men n=44	
	Item rating (3=high; 1=low)	Item rank for women	Item rating (3=high; 1=low)	Item rank for men
Equal opportunity for women in education and employment	2.47	1	2.21	5
The methods and power of commercial advertising (e.g. TV, magazines)	2.38	2	2.27	4
Marriage and family customs in America	2.35	3	1.96	17
Adjusting to the American way of university learning	2.26	4	2.21	5
The increasing uses of computers in the 1990s	2.26	4	2.43	1
Stopping conflicts and making peace between nations and races	2.26	4	2.30	2
Exercise for better mental and physical health	2.16	7	2.09	8
Care and arrangements for elderly family members	2.11	8	1.98	15
The various activities of the United Nations around the world	2.10	9	2.09	8
Air pollution; water pollution	2.08	10	2.07	10
Some conflicts between religion and modern science	2.03	11	1.86	19
Allowing sick and suffering old people to choose to die; letting them kill themselves when they so choose	1.98	12	1.98	15
The use of illegal drugs by young people	1.98	12	2.00	12
The practice of abortion; abortion rights*	1.95	14	1.86	19
Equal rights in society for gay, Lesbian and bisexual persons	1.90	15	2.00	12
Health insurance and automobile insurance in America	1.90	15	2.16	7
The increase of violence and crime in American cities	1.86	17	2.02	11
Comparing the beliefs of different religions to accept or reject each religion	1.78	18	2.00	12
Having one or more sex partners without marriage	1.76	19	1.96	17
The process of electing an American President	1.74	20	2.30	2

*Highlighted topics are those initiallly assumed to be oriented to individual moral decision.

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